

“Afterthoughts: Stilling the World, ” in OUT OF NOW: THE LIFEWORCS OF TEHCHING HSIEH, MIT press and Live Art Development, 2009

Afterthoughts: Stilling the World

Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of “making a living”... The only exception society is willing to grant is the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the only “worker” left in a laboring society.

The “impresario” in Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” surrounds the protagonist with “watchers,” to convince the audience that the serious work of fasting will be conducted with absolute integrity. Those chosen are to observe the hunger artist around the clock so there is no chance he could leave his cage to sneak food, read a book, or take an evening stroll. We are to be assured that he will remain locked up, fasting, for forty days, as promised. “The Watchers” are there to bear witness. These gestures, which may be necessary for some disbelievers within the story, are surely unnecessary for his readers outside. Because we are given omniscience and therefore insight into the character of the hunger artist, we know that the motivation to fast as long as possible comes from the artist himself and his own devotion to his “profession.” His chosen work is to live in conditions others perceive as extreme. Although he seeks the understanding of the audience, it is the transformation such action will bring to him internally - the respect he will gain for himself - that will be his true reward. When the hunger artist is finally dying, withering away in the straw, no one any longer takes interest in monitoring the progress of his fast. This collective obliviousness is unimaginably sad since it would appear that the world of the story is now diverted by less sincere gestures. But if we, as readers, ever were to have thought that the hunger artist was in any way blasé, we too would have stopped caring, and our attention also would have drifted long before. Like the mass audience inside the story, we would have gravitated to the young panther now prancing in the hunger artist’s former cage. Also drawn to his life force - wild and confident---we would have ignored the internal process the artist was slowly intent on pursuing.

Tehching Hsieh greatly admires Franz Kafka, who, along with Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Sisyphus, contemporary art, and his mother, is credited with having greatly influenced his work. In 1920, Milena Jesenska wrote to Max Brod, Kafka's friend, early biographer, and literary executor that "Frank," as she called him, "possesses not the slightest refuge. For that reason he is exposed to all those things against which we are protected. He is like a naked man among a multitude who are dressed." Etching Hsieh, like Kafka, and the Hunger Artist himself, also appears to be intensely vulnerable. He, too, is an artist of extreme gestures who sets his own rules and would never compromise the architecture of the performative events he has constructed.

Before Hsieh is locked in his cage for a year, to exist with the assistance of only one other human being on the outside, who will bring him food and take away waste, a lawyer is enlisted to witness the "sealing of the joints," so that the cage's impenetrability is authenticated, and the imagined audience is assured that Hsieh cannot leave. The lawyer is then brought back a year later to confirm that no seals have been broken, as if there were a dubious audience standing on the outside, waiting to be convinced, challenging all appearances. The piece seeks the affirmation of "The Law," even though the law, that governs Hsieh's work, is a rigorous system of his own invention. Hsieh is not an escape artist intent on showing us that he can get out of an impenetrable situation; rather, like the hunger artist, he seeks to convince us, and himself, that he has the psychic stamina to stay in. The meaning of the gesture is embodied in the discipline he exerts. We are witnessing a feat of sorts - like that of a high jumper or pole-vaulter. We care about the action because the athlete cares about the action. We are impressed with the training that has enabled such performers to reach a precise moment of achievement when their mental and physical stamina are so developed that they can surpass all others. It is this integration of the physical and psychic bodies - the mastery of the world of the self - that we witness in Hsieh's work, when he both desires to be isolated from society and has the discipline to survive it. This cultivated rigor is manifested in all the One Year Performances.

When we watch the footage of the police trying to force Hsieh inside during the One Year Performance in which he has sworn never to come inside, we understand how deep into his

psyche this adherence to self-imposed rigors actually goes. He becomes hysterical in response to the external aggression of the police pushing him into the building. He actually “wails.” The thought of betraying his own laws and destroying the authority of his work goes to the core of his being; it appears almost as if he were violating a taboo, a word Freud derives etymologically to signify “holy dread.” And although the rules are secular, the world of this piece becomes inviolable through a type of psychic juxtaposition---inside is now polluted, unclean, while outside is sacrosanct. Remarkably the judge is sympathetic, recognizing the vehemence of Hsieh’s reaction as a type of creative lawlessness. Even if he does not understand Hsieh’s motivation in art terms, he does understand his intensity in life terms and generously offers: “I see no reason to bring him indoors... These days, anything is art. Staying outside may be art.”

Surely there is freedom for the artist in knowing that he can withstand isolation and deprivation. Hsieh says, “I brought my isolation to the public while still preserving the quality of it.” And the “quality of it” appears to rest in the deep concentration and focus it has brought him. Historically, many individuals who became great leaders have had long periods of incarceration or exile when they were able to center themselves in their own consciousness, to achieve great confidence in their strength and determination, and, ultimately, to lead others. Gandhi used the discipline of fasting and his time in prison to reassure himself of his capacity to manifest political resolve. There must be comfort in such rigorous mastery - simply marking off each day at a time as one of survival. In such actions one’s life becomes identified with time beyond all illusion and, surprisingly, internal stillness can result, even though we are painfully aware that, although we can slow time down, it is always moving forward. In fact, we are time. It exists in and around us and is manifested in our final dissolution. “Living is nothing but consuming time until you die,” Hsieh says.

From the outside at least, Hsieh’s work appears to be about formally enacted deprivation, and as such it is difficult, speculative really, to talk about what actually occurs in his psychic universe. It is easier to talk about what does not occur - i.e., life as we know it. It appears that he consigns himself to a state of “un-freedom,” and he does so in very literal terms: He is tethered to another for a year, caged and isolated for a year, interrupted every

hour for his appointment with the time-clock and the camera for a year, “shelterless” - unable to go inside for a year. And, as Adrian Heathfield has discussed, we are not even given the workings of what occurs internally during these years. Hsieh appears to have gone completely inside himself. But what has become of all that internal processing? Heathfield writes, “So the work of art is not only posited here as being the action of the artist - but as an action of inaction as something that communicates through its non-communication.” There are no journals or records made available to us, no assessments of what has been achieved when one is lost in thought and in the most remote parts of the self for so long. Only marks on the wall and his understanding of “life as a life sentence” are offered, along with an external documentation of the bare facts and the inevitable ticking of time. A clock was also brought into the hunger artist’s cage, “the only piece of furniture,” the one additional symbolic artifact required.

Over decades, Hsieh’s work has been increasingly stripped bare until there is not even the illusion of production. He says of himself that in his early work “risk is manifested intentionally. But in my One Year Performances, this risk dissolves into life.” Now, after decades, there is nothing to show for the time spent contemplating art or not contemplating art, for the time focused on inaction in the world of cultural production. There is only his word that he did not think about art or make art for one year and then later that he tried to become invisible for thirteen, after which he called his peers together to mark the end of that time and the coming of the new millennium, to tell them only that he had survived. What artist would dare bring a group of other artists and critics together to witness an event about the absence of all events - to articulate non-production, a spectacle completely lacking in the spectacular? It is only within the sincerity of his effort that these actions are tolerated or “believed,” as Marina Abramovic writes, and that we are convinced that he is not a trickster--- at least not in the moral sense of pulling one over on us all. Hsieh’s work and his commitment to extremity have left many people breathless. How can he take such risks, live in such isolation, deprive himself of what the rest of us consider the comforts and joys of daily life for such little recognition, reward, or pleasure, and sustain it for so long? How can he systematically exclude the responses of a live audience who might offer him the energy

and will to carry on? Even the original hunger artist needed external affirmation. So people respond with awe, but also with a bit of fear at the mechanics and austerity of it all.

Tim Etchells, another excellent artist of durational performance, writes that when he watched Hsieh present the “Time Clock Piece” for the first time, “I was silenced by what I saw. I think I was frightened.” Perhaps he was frightened because of the seriousness of the work, because of its otherness, because the space created was so big, as he writes, “one could get lost in it.” Or perhaps it was terrifying because Hsieh does not try to mask the remarkable emptiness at the center of the work. Most of us need to believe that there is meaning in what we do, that our efforts impact, affect, change the world, even in the most miniscule ways. Of Hsieh’s work, Etchells writes, “It makes a sculpture of nothingness,” and this nothingness then exists in art time, alone.

But where is such time to be found if not in our collective agreement that such dimensionality exists? We witness it in each other’s creations and in our reactions to the time we spend in the space of art, knowing that we go to this invented place precisely to move beyond the historical dimension and the reality principle that can constrict the imagination.

Does any one of us dare to stare straight into the abyss of our own creations and consider that they might be meaningless or that they exist only in art time? And, if so, shouldn’t we also recognize that our own constructs might be cages or states of homelessness as well, some more functional, or glamorous than others? Aren’t we all then “doing time” until our time is up and there is no more?

There is an all-too-human poignancy to a life lived with such an ongoing consciousness of its own ephemerality. If we all were to live with Hsieh’s sense that there is only “the process of passing of time,” if we did not fill that space constantly, what would we, and the world, look like? It is too hard to absorb such realizations, and so Hsieh’s determination to consciously live this inevitability earns him respect among those who understand the seriousness of what he is attempting - a confrontation with the void and a stilling of the world.

Marina Abramovic, who knows a lot about this type of solitude and endurance, is also captivated by Hsieh’s intensity. She writes, “But what he has achieved in five yearlong performances is

more than any other performance artist ever managed to do. If I talk about performance art, I start with him.” And, “He has made more credibility than any living artist I know.”

The responses of Marina Abramovic, Peggy Phelan, Tim Etchells, Santiago Sierra, and the depth of Adrian Heathfield’s careful articulation of the work seem to indicate that Hsieh is an “artist’s artist,” pushing so hard on the edges of form that those also intent on pushing recognize that this work of this artist has gone even farther than their own: They are humbled by the daring and the accomplishment. Work categorized as such can demand a particularly cultivated sensibility, since it often inadvertently redefines the art making boundaries, which means that it can go unacknowledged by mainstream culture for some time, and even by the many existent art worlds.

William Blake was such an artist. The response to his work was so extreme that even Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, mistook him for a fool or a lunatic while others saw him as prophetic living in a heaven and hell of his own creation. Blake even sang hymns to God as he was dying, completely absorbed in a world beyond the historical dimension, breathing within his own imaginary universe of mythological constructs to the end. His were the most extravagant systems of thought given both poetic and visual form, but, nonetheless, he and Hsieh share something - an understanding of what it is to live in the realm of art, enfolded within its time and space, envisioning this time and space as the only dimensionality worthy of their complete attention.

Hsieh has created a body of work in which the act of thinking is the content. He has said: “Why don’t I make the process of thinking about art in my studio an art work..” Or “While doing this piece thinking was my major job.” But because we do not know what he was thinking while he structures the rules for his own deprivation, he also structures ours.

Art is a “thought thing,” writes Hannah Arendt, and, as such, inevitably generates more thoughts. Hsieh’s works are completely built on concepts and on the purity of those concepts. They tolerate no pollution - no violations of their fundamental design. Their law is non-negotiable. In part this is why he mostly does not engage the audience directly. Hsieh says, “If I became too social with an audience it would break the work.” And later, “But

of course, the rules could not be broken too often otherwise the work would collapse.” And yet, Abramovic asks, who is the recipient of all this documentation if not ultimately his audience? The work is a construct, built on an idea. That is its scaffolding. If one were to tinker too much with its foundation, the pieces would collapse, hence the necessary insulation from the world outside and the marked austerity of the world inside. The idea holds the work together until the moment when the work enters the body of art history and takes its rightful place, finds its home in an already defined art time and art space, which then become its armature. Hsieh’s sincerity, intelligence, and clarity infuse the work, but we sense the works’ fragility throughout. To press too much would be a violation and, what’s worse, would burden the work, the gesture, or event with a forced meaning that was never its intent. Yet, because we long for content, we tend to bring metaphor to the work’s literality, to try to densify it, to make a more layered meaning emerge. But Hsieh himself does not operate in this way. When he wanted to “disappear,” he simply did just that. Even if the exercise were designed to shed the ego and personality, so he might lose himself and his identity that perhaps held him down to earth too boldly, his response to the problem he posed was still literal. He attempted to travel as far from his established self as he could on the material-historical plane and become invisible, out of sight to all whom he knew and to the world within which he had traditionally moved.

Adrian Heathfield has approached this work and its artist with reverence, making only those poetic interrogations and allusions that are necessary, offering us conversations that we have longed for but never imagined would be possible, so that we can hear the language and philosophical discourse within which Hsieh himself understands the work. The intent of the pieces appears intact, allowed to exist in its emptiness and silence, still elusive even after so much has been said. He has created a frame for the documentation of Hsieh’s work and all the elements of its process - a safe holding environment - where the work can rest, where the artist’s actions as well as his words about them become the centerpiece and where writers like myself, and other artists can attempt to think around the edges, hoping to respond creatively and not invasively, commenting on the work’s echo and reverberations---carefully moving it out past itself. Thus an inten-

tional community has been formed around this fundamentally solitary project of Hsieh's life and work.

While the book has created a mental event to mirror Hsieh's material events, it also chronicles Hsieh's own evolution away from that materiality. When understood as a site of production, the work appears to demonstrate Hsieh's greater and greater unity of the self until, finally, he appears to have no need to present the self, reflected through projects at all. And so, in the last work, "Thirteen-Year Plan," where art time and historical time finally converge, the self is presented without persona. No longer hungry for recognition of its capacity to endure deprivation, the world of the self, his self, is now stilled and distilled, "kept alive," and sincerely grateful to have achieved just this.

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